

New Paradigms for the European Parliament

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Andrew Duff Fr 8 Jun 2018

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There's a lot of speculation, most of it idle, about the rise of the far right in Europe. As European elections loom in May next year, it's worth taking a closer look at the disposition of right-wing forces.

In the present European Parliament, elected in 2014, there are 151 MEPs strung between three eurosceptic, nationalist and populist party groups plus 21 motley *non-inscrits*. 45 of that number are British right-wingers who having committed collective hara-kiri will not be showing up next time. Brexit takes a heavy toll on the European right.

As any one of their number will tell you, it's a big mistake to lump these right-wingers together. They only constitute a threat to the rule of mainstream parties if they learn to act together in the Parliament. This is unlikely. For a start, combining forces at the EU level is for ultra-patriots and nationalists basically counter-intuitive — and quite a difficult jump to explain to voters back home.

Narcissism of small differences runs rife: the German AfD, for example, tends to find the French Rassemblement National (ex-Front National) too 'social'. Some, like the Italian Five Stars, are populist without being nationalist. Anti-semitism is only variably fashionable. Anti-Americanism, once rather a unifying force for the European right, has been confounded by the arrival of Trump. Russian money has helped the rise of some of Europe's rightist parties but not all. The Moscow faction includes Lega Nord, the Czechs, Austrians and Hungarians but not the Poles or the Baltics. In truth, the only thing that really unites all these forces is hostility to 'Brussels' — and here the fact that Brexit is not proving to be an unalloyed success lessens the seductive pull of leaving the euro or outright secession from the EU.

Orbán versus Macron

Without strong leadership Europe's right-wing movements will remain a disparate band at next year's elections. There is one man who knows this. Viktor Orbán certainly has form. He began his campaign against liberal democracy and European integration many years ago. Cleverer than David Cameron, Orbán did not remove his Fidesz MEPs (now 11) from the mainstream European People's Party (EPP). From the inside of the EPP, Orbán has undermined its traditional Christian Democratic and federalist credentials. Disregarding the party disciplines of the EPP membership, Orbán has gone out to recruit right-wing leaders for his cause. At the level of the European Council it has become easier to identify Orbán sympathisers in the serving prime ministers from the Visegrad Four (Poland, Czechia, Slovakia) as well as Austria, Slovenia and Romania. What Bulgaria's Borissov will do once he steps down from the rotating Council presidency is anyone's guess. Moreover, Orbán actively consorts with a variety of right-wing parties across the Union, many of them in opposition to EPP prime ministers, in Germany, France, Italy, Greece, Austria, Netherlands, Belgium, Sweden, Finland and Denmark. Hostility to immigration and open borders is his theme, but his target is the European Union.

Faced with this subversion, the EPP leadership has been blundering. The EPP party president Josef Daul and party group leader Manfred Weber claim they keep Orbán inside the club in the hope of taming him. But this gives Orbán licence to do what he likes. One EPP member party, the Dutch CDA, has at last broken ranks and seeks the expulsion of Fidesz. Many individual members, such as Carl Bildt, agree. But Daul and Weber seem less worried about Orbán's attack from the right than they are about the threat posed from the left by Emmanuel Macron. And here lies the rub.

The new polarisation of European politics is not along classic party lines of left and right as much as on the fault line between broadly federalist liberal democracy and distinctly nationalist illiberalism. The 2019 elections are shaping up to be played out on a grand scheme of Macron versus Orbán. The French President has bamboozled the Gaullists in France and now, understandably, wants to extend his reach wider across the EU. This time next year both he and Orbán will be recruiting newly-elected MEPs in an effort to create large groups in the new Parliament. If either succeeds the EPP is weakened; if both succeed, the EPP is finished.

A straw in the wind is the rumour that Poland's far-right Law and Justice Party, who now sit at Strasbourg with the British Tories, are negotiating a pact with the EPP. However implausible, such an eventuality would surely drive the moderate Polish Civic Platform, along with several other social Christians from Benelux and Scandinavia, into the arms of Macron's new group. Orbán will be behind that manoeuvre: importing Jaroslaw Kaczynski to the EPP would be a remarkable coup. Christian Democracy would at last have become illiberal democracy.

Spitzenkandidaten

Meanwhile, up front, the EPP is beginning to organise another *Spitzenkandidat*, a champion who, they hope, will be manoeuvred into succeeding Jean-Claude Juncker (EPP) as Commission President. Klaus Welle (EPP), Secretary General of the Parliament, and Martin Selmayr (EPP), Secretary General of the Commission are particularly keen on repeating this experiment which was first tried, with limited success, in 2014.

But the truth is that *Spitzenkandidaten* really only make sense if they head transnational lists for a pan-European constituency. Otherwise their claim to greater legitimacy lacks credibility. Without competing between each other on transnational lists, the EU level political parties are not real political parties. Without a uniform electoral procedure, the Parliament in 2019 will again be elected according to 27 separate systems and different campaigns. *Spitzenkandidaten* can add spice to the election but will not transform it.

The European Council, led by its President Donald Tusk (EPP), much dislikes the *Spitzenkandidat* process because it limits the right of initiative of the heads of government to nominate the President-elect. In 2014 the European Parliament certainly stretched the meaning of the treaty (Article 17(7) TEU) by arrogating to itself the power to serve up a candidate to the European Council. The *navette* between the two institutions after the elections that is foreseen in the treaty was superseded by Parliament's rush to promote Juncker (himself somewhat unwillingly) to head the Berlaymont.

Viktor Orbán and David Cameron opposed Juncker the *Spitzenkandidat* outright in 2014. Whereas Angela Merkel (EPP) was prepared to tolerate Juncker in 2014 she will not follow suit this time. In her recent interview with FAS (3 June), and again to EPP MEPs in a Munich speech (6 June), the Chancellor observed that the *Spitzenkandidaten* did not make much sense without transnational lists. She did not need to recall that it had been she and the EPP group in the Parliament, led by Weber, who had scuppered the European Parliament's proposal to introduce transnational lists as recently as 7 February.

Merkel also observes, this time quite fairly, that if a party nominates a *Spitzenkandidat* who is not backed by his or her prime minister, there is a problem. This would self-evidently be the case if the EPP were to acclaim Michel Barnier as its champion, but Emmanuel Macron did not to accept him as the French Commissioner.

Parliament's recent stipulation that it will only support the election of a Commission President who has been a *Spitzenkandidat* is also problematic because it effectively rules out any serving prime minister from taking the job. Few current leaders are going to risk their national job by taking leave to fight a European election.

President Macron, for his part, is for transnational lists but against *Spitzenkandidaten* — not least, it must be said, because he does not yet command a political group in the Parliament. The Liberals, meanwhile, who have a lot of prime ministers in the European Council, are split between the federalist Guy Verhofstadt and the eurosceptic Mark Rutte. It is obvious that Verhofstadt has much more in common with Macron than with Rutte. So any excuse ALDE can find to jettison the *Spitzenkandidat* will be seized upon with relief. The Socialists and Greens will find a *Spitzenkandidat* if they have to, but it is unlikely to be anyone of particular note.

What is likely to happen in 2019 is that the parliamentary groups will again make a play at *Spitzenkandidaten*, but that these folk will in fact be competing for top jobs within the Parliament and not the Commission presidency.

The real battle next year will not be centred on Potemkin-like *Spitzenkandidaten*, but will polarise around Emmanuel Macron and Viktor Orbán. The barricades are being erected, bit by bit, in the battle for and against liberal democracy and ever closer union. May the best man win.

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